

## About Bhante Punnaji

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# PUNNAJI MAHA THERA 'S MONUMENTAL CONTRIBUTION GOES ON UNSEEN! UNSUNG!

By Aloy Perera



The usual image of the average scholar Buddhist monk decked with degrees and qualifications that follow his nomenclature in abbreviated non essentials for a bhikkhu, such as M.A. s and Ph.D.s, often obscures the real savant, authority on Tripitaka and meditation master that Venerable Punnaji Maha Thera is to numerous enclaves of Buddhist intellectuals spread across the globe, particularly USA and Canada. This humble and unassuming Buddhist monk, unquestionably an intellectual giant of modern times and perhaps one of the foremost among today's world authorities on Buddhism, who a few years ago served as **Professor of Buddhism at Taiwan's Fo Kwan Buddhist University and as the director of Sri Lanka's former Mihindu Sarasaviya (university) Movement** still remains unnoticed and unsung for the most part in his own native Sri Lanka.

Punnaji Maha Thera who makes at least one prolonged annual carika to Sri Lanka has consistently kept at arms length this Buddhist nation's powers that be both among politicians of all hues and Sangha-politics above all, all through his **half a century of service to the Sambuddha Sasana**; often refusing to be politically correct (according to him, a euphemism for being dishonest), for the sake of recognition, honours or fame.

While most Buddhist Scholars excel in restricted fields of their chosen fields of study accomplished for examination purposes, Punnaji Mahathera's own insight-filled scholarship shines brighter simply because it's the result of intensive all embracing personal study and investigation cum practice of over half a century as an ordained Buddhist monk. A voracious reader from his young days in the nineteen-forties spent at the Dharmaraja College hostel, nestled in the hills of Kandy providing a panoramic view of the Dala Da Malgawa, the fabled Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, where he completed his secondary education Punnaji Maha Thera, preacher par excellence, continues to draw from an inexhaustible resource of Science, philosophy, world history and psychology, the very topics that caught his attention as a fashionable youth.

Born 26th November 1929, as Pushpananda Madawela, the youngest son of the aristocratic Madawela-Moonamale family in Madawela, in the Kurunegala district that had close links to some of the well known hill country peerage, he had his primary education at the Maliyadeva College School before being sent to Dharmaraja College in Kandy when he was but seven years old.

The example of his devout mother and the life he spent in Kandy, the seat of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, in the shadow of the sacred Dala Da Maligawa helped shape the future of this precocious and impressionable youth who had always displayed a certain propensity to the study of Buddha Dhamma and contemplation.....

Pushpananda Madawela entered the **Ceylon Medical College, then the medical faculty of the University of Ceylon**, opting to pass out as a medical practitioner. His stint of studies at the Medical College was marked by an intensive inner transformation where he had often toyed with the idea of making a total commitment to becoming a Buddhist monk. Living in Colombo as he did then he often visited the Vajirarama Temple to hear Venerable Narada Nayaka Thero preach and learn Dhamma. Soon Narada Thero introduced him to Venerable Madihe Pannasiha Thero who would eventually become elected the Mahanayake of the Amarapura Nikaya. Madihe Nayake Thero's piety and his Dhamma expositions had impressed him immensely. **Founding of a Bhikkhu Training Centre on modern lines to train novices was taking shape in the mind of visionary Madihe Nayake Thero.**

At the same time adolescent Puspananda Madawela continued his forays into Buddhism, History of Philosophy and the then not so well known discipline of western psychology. He read the works of Socrates and Plato and the earlier Thales who is said to have been a contemporary of Siddhattha Gotama. He became a frequent visitor to Colombo's public library where he was observed to be pouring over the volumes of Descartes, Hume, Kant and Keikergard, the existential philosopher. But his favorite became Sigmund Freud and his discoveries in attempting to understand the workings of the human mind. He would often go into transports of joy as he began to **understand the truth of Buddha's word through the insights he could glean out from then known different schools of Psychology, mainly, Freudian, Jungian and Adlerian schools. There was a lot more edgeling discipline of psychology**

1. Providing a clear, unassailable meaning to the profound original teachings of the Buddha as opposed to the traditional translations and interpretations found in the commentaries, the Visuddhimagga and later writings on Buddhism.
2. The misuse of key terms such as sati which is traditionally and misleadingly translated as concentration and its practice taught as concentrating on the in-out breath at the nostrils and how such concentrating practice can lead to self-hypnosis rather than to the states of jhana.

#### **ADDITIONAL POINTS FROM MAHENDRA:**

Once asked to list his key discoveries in Buddhism, Punnaaji Thero humbly obliged:

1. A unique and original interpretation of the Paticca samuppada, that explains the arising of dukkha at every moment in our lives as opposed to the traditional explanation which spans three-lives.
2. The path to Nibbana, through the gradual evolution of the Noble Eight-fold Path, for which he uses the term the Supernormal Eight-fold Way. He has dispelled current myths, which leading Buddhist teachers are grappling with, through his clear understanding and explanations.
3. The mental, physical and physiological changes one experiences in the gradual deepening of tranquility in Samatha meditation and the states of jhana.
4. The difference between "existence" and "experience," as expounded by the Buddha, and an yet unresolved problem in the field of Western philosophy. Punnaaji Thero spent many years of research in to the Tipitaka, deep reflection, supplemented by his own meditative practice and self-discovery in order to clearly understand this key secret one has to discover on the path to Nibbana.
5. The importance of the relaxation of the tensions in the body as an essential step in meditation, and entering the states of jhana. This discovery was triggered by a combination of his initial

struggle to understand the real meaning of the satipattana sutta as a youth and the discovery of a booklet titled, "How To Relax," written by Wilfrid Northfield in England. The combination of these two sources led Punjabi Thero to put his new learnings in to practice and thereby verify for himself what the Buddha meant in sutta such as the Anapanasati.

6. The value of "thinking as the Buddha did," as a daily practice for all Buddhists.
7. A clear understanding of the role of emotions and their link to tanha, the cause of dukkha, and how emotions can be gradually eliminated beginning with the relaxation of muscular tension and developing purity of mind.

### **Other points:**

Major influence of his mother during his early years: going to the temple on Full-moon day to meditate, and even wanting to stay back at the temple to continue his meditation taught by his mother.

After graduation from medical school:

Passing away of his mother, and his bed side assistance during her final days in true fashion of taking care of ones parents, the Buddhist way.

Practicing as a physician in the old rural towns and villages of Sri Lanka, where his contact with patients, from birth to death, provided him with a true appreciation of the fragility of life, futility of passion and development of viraga, a dispassion.

An extraordinary experience at the island hermitage meditation center where Punjabi Thero spent some time soon after being ordained. His life time of research and meditative practices were put to the test during this time. There he experienced for the first time the deep states of tranquility or states of jhana, as described in the sutta. He extended his stay to continue in these blissful states and gain insights through Vipassana.

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